

As host of Hollywood Squares for six seasons, I presided over a broadcast that utilized bluffing as an important part of the game. In that context it was used to comic effect. In the world of media consolidation and voice tracking, bluffing has become something else altogether. It's become a means to a corporate end; namely, to fool radio listeners into believing their "local" station is actively serving their community.

I started in local radio, in my hometown of Haverhill, MA, in 1972. I covered the City Council meetings, dug news out of police logs and interviewed local newsmakers on the station's talk show. There was an unspoken bond between the station and the community. It was this simple: We're here using your airwaves and thus, as we build our business, we owe you our attention. Sounds increasingly quaint in 2004, doesn't it?

Market forces are a generally reliable means which govern the ultimate fate of a business such as Starbucks or K-Mart. As such, the idea of the government regulating latte consumption or Martha Stewart fashions is obviously absurd (regulating Martha Stewart herself is another matter). The use of the public airwaves, I believe, requires a different approach. Here the power of the FCC, in defense of the public property, should be vigilant in safeguarding local programming. To do so, a clear definition of basic, local programming requirements is crucial.

At the very least, this definition should include baseline requirements for locally produced and locally originating programs. Ideally, all programming decisions would be made at the local level (as opposed to, say, Sinclair's edict that its' stations air a politically timed "documentary.")

News, public affairs and community events such as sports broadcasts could all fall under the local programming definition. Playing a local artists' music would be an example of good business sense for a local station but would stretch the definition of local programming. For example, playing a James Taylor song on Martha's Vineyard ain't exactly fulfilling the public trust. And I like James Taylor...

Similarly, non-broadcast community events such as charity fund drives, etc. fall under the same "good business sense" heading and wouldn't fulfill local programming requirements.

Given the above, the dishonest practice known as voice-tracking should be abolished. Disclosure rules, at a minimum, should be utilized. Something like this..

"Skip Masters here with the Manchester, NH weather direct from our broadcasting hub in Tempe, Arizona..."

See? When you look at it that way it seems like a stupid way to do business. Disclosure rules would prove the Emperor had no clothes.

At present, LPFM stations are wonderful examples of the vitality of local programming. I'm a founding member of one such station in Portsmouth, NH. During a recent visit to their studio, I saw firsthand the energy and creativity LPFM can unleash in a community starved for a local voice. From news coverage to local artists playing live, it is providing an outlet for many voices and views where corporate, monolithic radio does not.

I write this on the eve of a presidential election that is notable for a

massive registration of new voters. Americans want their voices heard at the ballot box and in the ongoing conversation of who we are and where we should go as a nation. The airwaves are a crucial conduit for that dialogue. Unfortunately, the airwaves are becoming the conduit for a few powerful corporations. This is not how a public trust should be kept. I ask the FCC to address this pressing issue in public hearings.

Sincerely,

Tom Bergeron
Greenwich, CT